

Weekly Market Bulletin

State of New Hampshire
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From Your Commissioner...

Formula for State's Top Dairy Herd: 'Nothing Special'

Every month the New England Country Folks newspaper publishes tables with the latest production numbers for herds participating in the region's two Dairy Herd Improvement (DHI) testing and recordkeeping programs.

Invariably those who follow this stuff—hard core dairy people, primarily—hunt through the data to see what Athmor Holsteins are up to, and invariably Athmor Farm is at the top of the heap among the hundreds of herds tabulated in the DHI monthly summaries.

Athmor, the name, is derived from the names of the two owners of this Lee operation, Russ Atherton and Tom Morrell, who formed a partnership in 1997 and have been going great guns ever since.

The latest DHI numbers show the 180 Athmor cows recording a rolling herd average of 31,966 pounds of milk, 1,129 pounds of milkfat and 951 pounds of protein per cow per lactation. For people not familiar with dairy management lingo, those numbers equate to a baseball batting average of .350 or a pitching record of, say, 25-4.

Production in the 32,000-pound range puts the Athmor herd in the top one percentile of all dairy herds in the nation.

I asked Russ Atherton the other day how they're achieving such stellar performance with their cows and he offered a very modest response of "nothing special."

Atherton and Morrell don't use BST, and never have. They feed a basic corn silage-haylage-grain concentrate ration formulated and adjusted frequently by an independent nutritionist.

They buy all their corn silage, mostly from Beaudry Enterprises of Charlestown and Bruce Crete of Boscawen, suppliers within a couple of hours' trucking distance. They grow grass-legume mixtures on about 125 acres of cropland that's increasingly hemmed in by the Seacoast Region's burgeoning development crush, and it's harvested for them by a custom operator, Brian Forst of Gilmanton.

Cows, all of which are registered, are milked three times a day, and the labor force consists of three fulltime employees and one part-timer. First thing every morning Atherton and Morrell have a quick meeting to plan the day's work, "And then we go from there," Atherton says.

These guys put all their focus on the cows and the people working with the cows, and let other people do the crops work. It's a strategy showing up more and more on successful dairies around New England and, with a 31,966-pound herd average, you sure can't argue with it.

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New Hampshire's retail grocery scene continues to be dominated by three organizations, Shaw's, Hannaford Bros. and Demoulas/Market Basket.

The Griffin Report of Food Marketing, the region's dominant supermarket trade publication, reports these three firms sell about three-quarters of all groceries in the state.

Shaw's, based in West Bridgewater, MA, runs 35 New Hampshire stores and captures 25.99 percent of sales; Hannaford, of Scarborough, ME, has 29 units and a 24.78 percent market share; and Demoulas/Market Basket, headquartered in Tewksbury, MA, with 24 stores takes 22.68 percent of the total sales.

Wal-Mart's seven New Hampshire supercenters capture 10.77 percent of the state's grocery dollars. Relative newcomer Stop & Shop—the biggest food retailer overall in New England—has seven stores in the Granite State which yield a 4.45 percent market share.

The rest of the state's food business is divvied up amongst Vista Foods, Golub/Price Chopper, P & C Food Markets, J & T, Save-A-Lot and some 45 independent grocery stores.

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Back in the 1980s and 1990s New Hampshire's agricultural fairs constructed attractive new milking facilities for their dairy exhibitors. Prior to then cows were milked with portable vacuum pumps and pail milkers and likely as not the milk was just dumped out onto the ground around the show barns.

Many fairgoers were turned off by the sight—and smell—of dumped milk, so milking parlors and bulk tanks to refrigerate and hold the show cows' milk were welcomed additions. And the milk could be sold to a handler and the proceeds distributed among the exhibitors, too.

Sad to say, that era has come to an end. Fairs are being told that commingled milk from cows from multiple farms lacks traceability and thus represents an unacceptable biosecurity risk for processors.

Anyone with a workable idea for a way to dispose of fair milk please send it along.

Steve Taylor, Commissioner